

18. RANGE EXTENSION OF THE NEPAL BABBLER (*ALCIPPE NIPAENSIS*)

On 25th March, 1991 we were coming down the steep slopes of the Shivaliks which were covered with bamboo (*Dendrocalamus strictus*), *Anogeissus latifolia*, *Lannea coramandelica* and *Shorea robusta* in the *Guwalgad sot* (sot = stream or river) area of the Rajaji-Corbett corridor in the western part of Uttar Pradesh. We were trying to locate a radio collared cow elephant. A small brownish bird was disturbed from a bamboo clump. We went near the bamboo clump to which the bird had gone and located it. It had a prominent white ring around the eye with a black supercilium and buff with white in the breast region. The head was greyish brown with greyish cheeks. The upper parts of the body was light brown with a long tail. It was solitary and moved from one bamboo clump to another, probably foraging for insects.

On going through the HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN by Ali and Ripley (1983) OUP,

Delhi, we found that it was the Nepal Quaker or Nepal Babbler, which has been reported to be found only in the north eastern Himalayas. The Nepal babbler has not been reported from this part of Uttar Pradesh and thus this is a positive "range extension" for this species. This species was sighted and photographed by one of us (SFWS) in 1989 near River Rawason, the western boundary of the corridor.

August 17, 1995 S.F. WESLEY SUNDERRAJ  
JUSTUS JOSHUA<sup>1</sup>

Wildlife Institute of India,  
Post Box 18,  
Dehradun-248 001.

<sup>1</sup>Present address:  
Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and  
Natural History,  
Kalampalayam PO,  
Coimbatore-640 010.

19. WAS RICHARD MEINERTZHAGEN'S RECORD OF A "GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL *LARUS MARINUS*" IN RAJASTHAN REALLY HEUGLIN'S GULL *L. HEUGLINI*?

The Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* of the northern shores of the Atlantic Ocean is reported by Ali and Ripley (1981) and Roberts (1991) to have occurred in the Indian subcontinent on the strength of a single report of a bird killed on Deoli jheel 88 km south of Nasirabad in Rajasthan on 16th November, 1899 by Richard Meinertzhagen (1900). On working through the records of large, white-headed gulls occurring around southern Asia I was unable to find any other satisfactory published description of this species, so that in view of the doubts about this observer's credibility (Crocker 1989, Knox 1993) it seems time the record received further scrutiny.

At the time Meinertzhagen was a subaltern in the Royal Fusiliers, aged 21 with no scientific training, and according to Crocker (1984) it was another dozen years before he published any other important ornithological contribution. He reported

that the gull came to a goose he had shot, whereupon he killed it as well, recognised it immediately from experience in Britain as a Great Black-backed Gull, and threw it away without bothering to preserve it. The only details that he provides are that it was "fully adult and with a fine dark mantle", and had a body-length within one or two inches (2.5-5 cm) of that of the goose, which should have been approximately 30-35 inches (55-89 cm). He thought that the most remarkable feature of the record was not that the bird had occurred in India, but that it was so far inland.

Since Colonel Meinertzhagen (1935) later became an authority on this group of gulls nobody appears to have questioned his identification. By current standards it is quite inadequate for a member of a rather difficult group of birds. There is, moreover, a more likely alternative identification of which it is unlikely that anyone would have been aware at that time, Heuglin's Gull *Larus (fuscus)*



*heuglini*, which seemed to me as large and dark on the back as a Great Blackback, and has a wing-length of 405-469 mm compared to 447-523 mm (and an overall length of 64-78 cm, just as large as a goose) in the latter (Cramp and Simmons 1983). While *heuglini* normally winters further west, there is a subadult from the Whistler Collection in the British Museum (Natural History) taken on the Ganges at Patna, Bihar, on 11th March 1939, so that Meinertzhagen's bird could well have belonged to this form instead.

Heuglin's Gull is usually treated as a race of either the Herring Gull *L. argentatus*, or much more appropriately the more marine Lesser Black-backed Gull *L. fuscus*, but the breeding distribution of all these birds may overlap around the White Sea, with some intergradation along the River Volga, and *L. heuglini* is now regarded by some Russian ornithologists as a distinct species (Stepanyan 1990, Filchagov 1994). Most nominate *heuglini* appear to winter on the west side of the Indian Ocean, and the Patna bird may be the most easterly record, whereas most similar gulls wintering around the coasts of the Indian subcontinent appear to belong to its paler-backed eastern ally or race *L. (h?) taimyrensis*, which

winters eastwards to China (Bourne 1994).

The curious feature of this record is surely not that Meinertzhagen misidentified a difficult gull in his youth, but that he failed to correct the identification when he became older and supposedly wiser. Possibly he forgot about it, or thought that other people had done so, but he had a curiously dismissive attitude to mistakes. Thus, when I wrote to him in the early 1950s asking what else he saw when he made field notes on the feeding behaviour of the rare Raza Lark *Calendrella razae* (Meinertzhagen 1952), he replied "he had nothing to add to what he had already written", when it later became notorious that he had never set foot on the only island where this lark occurs (Crocker 1989). But while in this case he may also have been unwilling to admit an error, it seems unnecessary to dismiss the record as a fraud while there is a natural explanation for misidentification available.

August 26, 1995

W.R.P. BOURNE  
Department of Zoology,  
Aberdeen University,  
Tillydrone Avenue,  
Aberdeen AB9 2TN, Scotland.

#### REFERENCES

- ALI, S. & S.D. RIPLEY (1981): Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan. 2nd edition, Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- BOURNE, W.R.P. (1994): The need to distinguish between the Lesser Black-backed and Heuglin's Gulls in the Pacific. *Pacific Seabirds* 21(2): 7.
- CROCKER, M. (1989): Richard Meinertzhagen soldier, scientist and spy. London.
- CRAMP, S. & K.E.L. SIMMONS (eds.) (1983): The Birds of the Western Palearctic Vol. 3 Waders to Gulls. Oxford.
- FILCHAGOV, A.V. (1994): Contact zones of *Larus argentatus-cachinnans-fuscus* Gull Complex in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia. *J. Orn.* 135 (suppl): 44.
- KNOX, A. (1993): Richard Meinertzhagen a case of fraud examined. *Ibis* 135: 320-325.
- MEINERTZHAGEN, R. (1900): Reputed occurrence of Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) while shooting in Rajputana. *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.* 13: 374.
- MEINERTZHAGEN, R. (1935): The races of *Larus argentatus* and *Larus fuscus*: with special reference to Herr B. Stegmann's recent paper on the subject. *Ibis*. (5)2: 762-773.
- MEINERTZHAGEN, R. (1952): Review of the Alaudidae. *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* 121: 81-132.
- ROBERTS, T.J. (1991): The Birds of Pakistan, Oxford University Press, Karachi.
- STEPANYAN, L.S. (1990): Conspectus of the ornithological fauna of the USSR. Moscow. (In Russian).

#### 20. NOTES ON GROWTH AND MATURITY IN THE INDIAN ROOFED TURTLE (*KACHUGA TECTA*)

Sayaji Baug Zoo, Vadodara, Gujarat, India has been successfully breeding the Indian roofed turtle

(*Kachuga tecta*) since 1991. The first batch of seven hatchlings were maintained in an enclosure